



Resistance and Resilience: The New Woman in Dalit Feminist Narratives

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Abstract— The present research examines the emergence of the “New Woman” in Dalit feminist narratives, highlighting both themes of resilience and resistance as they are expressed in Dalit women's writings and lives. The study examines how Dalit women resist gender and caste hierarchies while establishing conditions for self-identity and empowerment through a critical analysis of fictional and autobiographical works by authors such as Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar. According to the study, the New Woman in Dalit literature is a figure of transformation as well as uprising, redefining identity, regaining voice, and rebuilding community. The study reveals that these narratives, which emphasize the self-reliance, equality, and enduring spirit of Dalit women, express a significant counter-narrative to prevailing patriarchal and discriminatory notions. It evolves this by drawing on intersectional feminist theory and Dalit discourse. A vital lens through which to view the intersections of gender and caste in India is offered by Dalit feminist narratives. This essay examines the themes of resiliency and resistance in Dalit women writers' creative works, with a particular emphasis on the rise of the “New Woman.” This study demonstrates how Dalit women's literature challenges Brahminical patriarchy and reframes feminist discourse from a Dalit perspective through an analysis of the writings of Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar.



Keywords— New Women, Identify, Empowerment, Equality, Dalit, Feminism, Gender

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit women's literary works offer a distinct counternarrative that challenges both conventional feminist discourses and Dalit male-centered narratives. Situated at the intersection of gender and caste oppression, Dalit feminism addresses the compounded marginalization experienced by Dalit women, in contrast to upper-caste feminist movements that often overlook caste as a critical axis of analysis. This paper explores how the Dalit feminist conceptualization of the “New Woman” is shaped by resilience and resistance. The study's intersectional feminist methodology draws on Dalit feminism, postcolonial studies, and subaltern theory, with important academic works by Uma Chakravarti, Gopal Guru, and Sharmila Rege as a foundation to examine Dalit women's literary manifestations of agency and resistance (Chakravarti 78; Guru 39; Rege 112). This exploration seeks to reveal the subversive potential embedded in their narratives,

highlighting how they negotiate and subvert patriarchal and casteist norms (Sethi and Nayak 138). Intersectionality is essential to understanding the experiences of Dalit women, who face discrimination based on their caste, class, gender, and disability (Dutt 177). Analyzing Dalit women's literature reveals that the “New Woman” is not merely an imitation of Western ideals but a figure rooted in their lived experiences, representing an assertion of dignity, self-respect, and the right to a life free from exploitation. Dalit women have historically been active agents of change, participating in anti-caste movements and challenging patriarchal structures within their communities (Samantaray). They often employ passive resistance tactics in their daily lives to counter oppression, as open resistance can sometimes be counterproductive (Sethi and Nayak 138).

Dalit women writers engage in a literary battle against gender and caste discrimination, using their craft to expose

societal inequalities and challenge prevailing historical narratives. Bama's semi-autobiographical novel *Karukku* critiques caste-based discrimination within the Catholic Church and society, with the protagonist resisting both religious and patriarchal structures through education and self-awareness (Chakravarti 78). Baby Kamble's memoir *The Prisons We Broke* provides a firsthand account of Dalit women's lived experiences, illustrating their resistance to caste-based exploitation and their involvement in Ambedkarite movements. Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life* highlights the intersection of gender and caste oppression, tracing her journey from marginalization to empowerment. These literary works underscore the importance of education, agency, and collective action in challenging societal norms and attaining self-determination (Nayar 83). Dalit women writers challenge gender norms and societal expectations through their assertion of agency and self-expression, as their writings offer a powerful platform to voice their experiences, challenge stereotypes, and advocate for social justice (Nath 230). Despite facing numerous obstacles, Dalit women writers have produced a wealth of literature that serves as a testament to their resilience and determination. Dalit women's narratives often diverge from mainstream feminist perspectives, which tend to focus on the experiences of upper-caste women. These autobiographical accounts shed light on the harsh realities of domestic labor, motherhood, and social exclusion experienced by Dalit women (Nath 230). They also underscore the importance of solidarity and collective action in challenging the entrenched structures of caste and gender-based discrimination.

Resistance exemplifies the fight against oppression, while resilience underscores how Dalit women sustain their struggles despite adversity. Education emerges as a recurrent theme in Dalit women's literature, symbolizing empowerment and self-reliance. Collective action, often inspired by Ambedkarite ideology, further strengthens the resilience of Dalit women. Ultimately, Dalit women authors reclaim their histories, traditions, and voices, subverting dominant caste narratives. Dalit literature redefines historical and cultural narratives, amplifying voices that have long been marginalized. Dalit literature serves as a vital tool for social transformation, providing a platform for marginalized voices to challenge systemic oppression and advocate for a more just and equitable society (Martin 370).

Dalit feminist narratives are powerful literary expressions that highlight the intertwined oppression of caste, gender, and class. Rooted in lived experiences, these narratives often take the form of autobiographies and memoirs, challenging both upper-caste patriarchy and male-dominated Dalit discourse. Writers like Bama, Baby

Kamble, and Urmila Pawar use their voices to resist marginalization, assert identity, and reclaim cultural memory. Their works redefine feminism through the lens of caste, offering a sharp critique of mainstream feminist and Dalit movements that overlook Dalit women's unique struggles (Rege 112). By exposing the flaws of "Dalit patriarchy," these narratives initiate a theoretical rethinking of feminist and Dalit scholarship. These narratives promote critical awareness and empathy, prompting broader societal introspection and action. Literary endeavors have been instrumental in the establishment of counterpublics for Dalit women, permitting them to articulate their predicaments and challenges while fostering community and solidarity (Sarvesh, Singh, and Alam 91). In the face of social discrimination, physical violence, and abject poverty, Dalit women have shown resilience through self-organization and political consciousness (Hans). Dalit women are transforming the public sphere through digital activism, resisting dominant caste narratives, and mobilizing against discrimination (Thakur 360). Political participation and representation constitute fundamental pillars of a flourishing democratic society, yet for Dalit women in India, these concepts are often mediated through the complex intersections of caste, class, and gender (Mehrotra 59).

The concept of the "New Woman" in Dalit literary works challenges traditional gender roles and redefines agency. Unlike the archetype of the upper-caste feminist, the Dalit New Woman emerges from a history of caste-based oppression, advocating for both gender and caste equality. She is an activist, an intellectual, and a survivor who transforms her struggles into a means of empowerment for her community. The "New Woman" in Dalit literature represents a strong, self-aware, and resistant Dalit woman who challenges both caste and patriarchal oppression. Unlike the traditional portrayal of women as submissive or silent sufferers, the New Woman reclaims her identity, asserts her voice, and becomes an agent of change. Through education, activism, and self-expression, she redefines her role in society, challenging historical and contemporary forms of marginalization. She embodies not just individual liberation but also collective empowerment (Cherechés, "The Resilience of Caste"). The narrative exclusion of women whose bodily autonomy has been compromised is challenged by the self-representation and assertion of agency in Dalit women's narratives (Daya 97).

Key Characteristics of the New Woman in Dalit Literature:

- Awareness of Caste and Gender Oppression
- Assertion of Self and Identity
- Resistance to Patriarchal Norms

- Pursuit of Education and Autonomy
- Commitment to Social Justice and Activism

Dalit women's literary works showcase their resistance against various forms of oppression, including domestic violence, religious hypocrisy, and patriarchal norms. These narratives highlight the everyday acts of rebellion and the transformative journeys of Dalit women, as exemplified in the works of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble. Dalit literature offers a lens into the lives of marginalized communities and serves as a testament to the resilience and agency of Dalit women (Guha 85). The concept of the "New Woman" in Dalit literature is not an idealized construct but a grounded representation of Dalit women's strength, which lies in their ability to survive, resist, and transform their lived realities (Kamble 54). Dalit feminist narratives illustrate the interplay of resistance and resilience that define this New Woman. Through a close examination of literary works by Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, this paper demonstrates how Dalit women's literature not only critiques systemic oppression but also paves the way for self-assertion and collective liberation. Dalit women have long occupied marginal positions, excluded from both the Feminist and Dalit Movements (Emmadi et al. 1619).

The scholarship on feminism in India must recognize the distinct voices of Dalit women, as their narratives foreground the intersections of caste, class, and gender, in contrast to the often caste-blind perspectives of upper-caste feminist discourses. The concept of the "New Woman" in Dalit feminist literature departs from elite feminist constructs and colonial modernity, offering a deeply grounded representation of resistance rooted in the lived experiences of Dalit women. Dalit women's autobiographical and testimonial writings challenge both Brahminical patriarchy and Dalit male-centric discourse, carving out a new literary space for women's self-articulation and community-centered narratives. Intersectional approaches are essential for understanding and addressing the complex and interconnected systems of oppression that affect Dalit women. Intersectionality offers a valuable framework for examining the experiences of Dalit women, as it recognizes the interconnected systems of oppression based on race, gender, and class (Cherechés, "Unveiling the Oppressed Body" 63; Raman 272).

II. RESILIENCE IS SEEN IN THEIR EVERYDAY ACTS OF SURVIVAL

Dalit women, exemplified by figures like Bama, demonstrate remarkable resilience through their pursuit of education, support for their families, and unwavering refusal to be defeated by constant humiliation and social

ostracism. Their unwavering determination and strong-willed perseverance in the face of adversity are powerfully captured in Baby Kamble's depictions of her mother and other Dalit women. These women possess a quiet yet profound strength, enduring hardship and injustice without surrendering their essential sense of self. Dalit women have historically occupied marginalized positions, often excluded from both the feminist and Dalit movements, yet they have creatively leveraged their "outsider-within" status to articulate their experiences (Emmadi et al. 1619). Resistance, on the other hand, often manifests in more subtle but deeply transformative ways. It appears in the refusal to conform to restrictive caste roles, the questioning of religious hypocrisy, and the courageous act of writing their own stories. These women resist not only external oppression but also the internalized shame and silence imposed upon them. Their act of writing becomes a profound political statement, a reclaiming of voice, agency, and historical narrative. Seemingly mundane acts, such as refusing to eat leftover food, walking on "forbidden" paths, or speaking out against injustice, become radical in a society deeply rooted in caste obedience. Dalit women, who constitute a significant portion of the Dalit population, navigate lives often marked by hardship, yet their historical and contemporary activism remains a powerful force, particularly at the grassroots level where they form the backbone of many Dalit movements (Samantaray).

Ultimately, the narratives of Dalit women are not merely testimonies of suffering, but rather, documents of power, courage, and transformation. Their resilience keeps them standing firm, while their resistance propels them forward, challenging the very structures that seek to erase or subjugate them. In revealing their multi-dimensional experiences shaped by the convergence of caste, gender, class, and disability, Dalit women unmask the intricate systems of discrimination that fuel social stratification and constrain access to resources and advancement within Indian society (Dutt 177). Emerging in the 1980s, intersectionality offers a framework to investigate the interconnected systems of oppression encountered by women, particularly Black women, based on race, gender, and class, thereby offering a valuable lens through which to examine the experiences of Dalit women. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of Dalit women's identities, which extend beyond the singular categories of "woman" or "Dalit," and recognizing the complex interplay of various forms of oppression, intersectionality offers a nuanced framework to understand the specific challenges faced by Dalit women. This empowers efforts to dismantle the structures that perpetuate their marginalization. Bama's works, particularly *Karukku* and *Sangati*, powerfully depict themes of resistance against the intertwined oppressions of

caste and gender, rooted in the lived experiences of Dalit communities. In *Karukku*, Bama utilizes her narrative as a form of protest, highlighting the injustices she encountered as a Dalit Christian woman within both the Catholic Church and educational institutions. Her act of writing in Tamil and sharing her testimony becomes a resistance to the dominant upper-caste discourses that often exclude marginalized voices (Cherechés, "The Resilience of Caste"). In *Sangati*, resistance takes on a more collective form, focusing on the everyday lives of Dalit women who confront the dual burden of caste and patriarchy. Through shared stories, humor, labor, and mutual support, these women resist the societal norms that seek to silence and oppress them. Both texts depict resistance not only in overt rebellion but also in small, everyday acts, such as sending girls to school, rejecting dowry, questioning authority, or simply surviving with dignity. By centering Dalit women's voices and experiences, Bama challenges historical erasure and creates a space for asserting their identity and agency, making her work a powerful act of literary and social resistance (Padmapriya).

Bama's literary works, particularly the texts *Karukku* and *Sangati*, explore the themes of resilience and resistance in the lived experiences of Dalits, especially Dalit women. Her writings highlight the systemic discrimination and oppression faced by this marginalized community, while also documenting their remarkable ability to endure, challenge, and transform their circumstances. The autobiographical narrative of *Karukku* serves not only as a personal testimony but also as an act of witnessing and documenting the trauma and strategies for survival within the Dalit community (Nayar 83). In *Karukku*, Bama recounts a formative childhood incident that sparked her awareness of the injustice of caste-based hierarchies. This emotional response marked the beginning of her journey toward critical consciousness and resistance. Bama's pursuit of education, despite facing caste-based discrimination, demonstrates her determination to use knowledge as a tool to challenge societal norms and share her story. Through her autobiography, Bama redirects focus onto herself and other Dalit women, reclaiming their dignity and creating a unique identity for them (Smriti 113).

Sangati, on the other hand, shifts the focus to the collective resilience of Dalit women. Bama documents their ability to find strength in each other, even as they confront physical labor, domestic violence, and poverty. The women's sense of humor, solidarity, and sheer survival is portrayed as a form of resistance against the dehumanizing forces of caste and patriarchy. Furthermore, Bama's narrative style, characterized by its raw authenticity and unapologetic portrayal of Dalit life, disrupts traditional literary

conventions that often marginalize or misrepresent marginalized communities (Rajendran 89).

Bama's critique of institutional casteism within the Catholic Church, as well as her decision to leave the convent and continue her struggle independently, underscores her moral resilience and the courage to act on her convictions. Additionally, Bama's choice to write in the Tamil dialect of her community asserts the validity of their experiences and reclaims narrative authority for Dalit voices that have historically been excluded from mainstream discourse. Through this book, Bama makes an impactful appeal to her fellow folks—the Dalits and, in particular, to the Dalit women—to join hands together in re-conceptualizing and re-asserting their collective as well as individual identities so as to claim their rightful place in the Indian social order (Singh 105). Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar's autobiographical writings powerfully depict how Dalit women resist oppression and demonstrate remarkable resilience. Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* critiques the dehumanizing Brahmanical caste system, challenging both societal exclusion and patriarchal norms within the Dalit community. Her narrative, inspired by Ambedkar's vision, uses education and Buddhism to reject caste hierarchy. Kamble also highlights Dalit women's endurance in the face of hunger, violence, and marginalization, describing their relentless struggles to ensure their children's survival (Pai et al.).

Dalit women's resilience and resistance are powerfully depicted in the narratives of Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar. Their writings challenge dominant caste and gender oppression, using personal stories, political consciousness, and collective struggle to assert Dalit women's agency and strength. Pawar's work, in particular, highlights the intersection of caste and gender, critiquing the limitations of upper-caste feminism. Her resilience is reflected in her commitment to narration, education, and community-building, as well as her spiritual and ideological embrace of Buddhism. Together, these authors present Dalit womanhood not as passive, but as actively resisting and transforming their worlds through memory, writing, and collective action. Dalit women possess a unique and powerful form of resistance that is expressed through their distinct language and communication styles (Sethi and Nayak 138).

Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar each depict resistance and resilience in distinct ways shaped by their personal and social contexts. Bama's *Karukku* centers on individual resistance through education and rejecting oppressive religious structures, while her resilience stems from writing despite isolation. Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* reflects collective resistance inspired by

Ambedkarite ideology, critiquing caste, and patriarchy, with her resilience shown in raising community consciousness. Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* blends personal narrative with political engagement, as her resistance lies in feminist activism and her resilience in navigating multiple marginalizations. Together, their narratives demonstrate diverse modes of challenging injustice—Bama's struggle, Kamble's collective activism, and Pawar's intersectional critique—highlighting the strength and agency of Dalit women. Intersectional analysis posits that individuals possess multifaceted identities, thereby moving beyond simplistic, single-axis categorizations such as "woman" or "Dalit," and instead, foregrounding the complex interplay of various forms of oppression that shape lived experience and social inequality. Applying an intersectional lens to the experiences of Dalit women illuminates how caste-based discrimination intersects with gender inequality, economic exploitation, and other forms of marginalization to create unique challenges and barriers. Dalit women actively carve out spaces for enjoyment and entertainment amid hardship, particularly within their work environments (Sethi and Nayak 138).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DALIT FEMINISM AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Dalit feminism challenges both gender and caste oppression. According to Gopal Guru, "Dalit women talk differently," reflecting a unique experience not covered by Savarna feminism. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory is crucial, as Dalit women's oppression stems from the intersection of caste, gender, class, and often religion. Chakravarti's concept of graded patriarchies, situated within the overarching structure of Brahmanical patriarchy, elucidates the distinct and often intensified forms of oppression endured by Dalit women, acknowledging that patriarchal power manifests and operates in nuanced ways contingent upon the specific caste location of women (Chakravarti 52). Sharmila Rege argues that Dalit women's writing in a testimonial mode is a form of "counter-memory," resisting dominant narratives of history and identity (Kottaparamban et al. 24). Paik adds that education and writing are tools of survival and revolution for Dalit women, helping them rebuild their identities in modern India (Paik 145). Dalit women have been marginalized in both the mainstream feminist movement and the Dalit movement. Dalit women writers challenge both caste and gender norms, as Bama encourages fellow Dalits and Dalit women to unite and redefine their identities to claim their rightful place in Indian society. Both Black American and Dalit literature share a sphere of convergence, as they are oppositional and resistant to the exploitations and

persecutions imposed on them by the "superior" race and caste. Dalit women's writing suffers from the same kind of condescension that is experienced by Black women's writing in that they are seldom considered mainstream (Mukhopadhyay 88). Given the risks of retaliation and backlash that Dalits frequently face when overtly defying or challenging the established social order, open resistance can potentially prove detrimental to their well-being and safety. Acknowledging the severe consequences that may result from directly challenging authority, Dalit women often employ subtle, nuanced, and indirect approaches to navigate and, at times, subvert the oppressive systems governing their daily lives, thereby carving out spaces of agency within highly constraining environments (Mittal 37).

IV. REPRESENTATION OF RESISTANCE IN DALIT FEMINIST NARRATIVES

Dalit feminist authors employ both aesthetic and political resistance strategies in their literature. They challenge conventional narrative structures, eschew sanitized language, and assert their political subjectivity.

4.1 Bama's *Karukku*: Language as Resistance

In her work *Karukku*, Bama disrupts traditional literary conventions by incorporating Tamil linguistic structures into her English narration. This linguistic nonconformity serves as an affirmation of her cultural identity. Bama's decision to leave the Christian convent, after recognizing its casteist structures, reflects her growing political consciousness (Bama, *Karukku* 85). As scholar Rege observes, this form of self-expression represents a "writing from the wound." This is a calculated divergence from the established literary norms of the upper castes, symbolizing a rejection of their cultural hegemony and an assertion of Dalit self-expression (Smriti 113).

4.2 Urmila Pawar: Memory and Reclamation

Urmila Pawar's text, *The Weave of My Life*, interweaves recollections of oral tradition, familial history, and political activism. Pawar portrays the "New Woman" as a figure who adeptly navigates between conventional domestic duties and contemporary political consciousness (Pawar 44). The work underscores education and the philosophies of Ambedkar as transformative instruments. Pawar's narratives serve as a critical lens through which to examine the complex, interwoven layers of oppression that Dalit women face, encompassing not only caste-based discrimination but also gender inequality and class-based exploitation, thereby amplifying the urgency for social justice and equality (Emmadi et al. 1620).

4.3 Baby Kamble: Redefining the Domestic

In her work, *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble provides a critical analysis of both caste-based patriarchy and oppressive structures within the Dalit community. Kamble depicts the household as a space of perseverance and resistance, underscoring how the mere survival of Dalit women is an inherently political act. Her critique of internalized caste hierarchies aligns with Crenshaw's assertion that oppression manifests in multifaceted ways (Kamble 56). Dalit women writers have successfully achieved the goal of representing the sexuality and sexually-charged language of Dalit women, which is a powerful disruption of the feminine in that it refuses to play to patriarchal expectations about feminine decorum (Hubel 299).

V. RESILIENCE AND THE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL

Dalit women's literary works underscore resilience as a purposeful, communal, and political endeavor. As Satyanarayana and Tharu articulate, these narratives are not merely individual expressions of hardship but collective assertions of selfhood, survival, and historical identity (Sharma 45). In the literary works of Jonathan and Akkarmashi, the protagonists confront systematic marginalization, yet ultimately develop as critical intellectuals and authors. This transition from enduring oppression to asserting their agency encapsulates the ethos of the Dalit New Woman (Festino 28). Yashica Dutt's autobiographical narrative, *Coming Out as Dalit*, provides a modern exemplification of resilience. By disclosing her identity, the text confronts both societal and academic exclusion (Maurya 97).

VI. LANGUAGE, SILENCE, AND VOICE

Dalit women authors assert their voice and language as means of resistance. Bama's unconventional narrative structure and Pawar's intertextual incorporation of oral histories challenge both conventional literary aesthetics and Savarna (upper-caste Hindu) sensibilities. According to Rawat and Satyanarayana, this narrative approach constitutes a form of counter-canon, rewriting history from the margins (James and Mathew 122). The break from silence is deliberate and urgent. These women write not merely to tell stories, but to redefine the very foundations of knowledge and legitimacy. Gayatri Spivak questioned whether the subaltern (the marginalized) can speak—Dalit women's literature responds resoundingly in the affirmative, as they raise their voices loudly (Preeti 64).

VII. THE DALIT NEW WOMAN: FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE

The Dalit New Woman is an active agent who constructs her own identity, rather than passively receiving modernity. The poems and narratives in *Still I Rise* demonstrate a confident expression of women's subjective experiences (Guru 103). These women embody multifaceted roles, transcending the limited characterizations of mother and worker to also encompass activist, leader, and theorist identities. This representation challenges colonial depictions of the "modern woman" and instead aligns with Ambedkarite principles of dignity, equality, and justice. Dalit women writers, through their literary contributions, have strategically utilized their marginality—their unique position as "outsider-within"—to articulate their lived experiences and critique the dominant narratives of both the feminist and Dalit movements, thereby enriching the discourse on social justice and equality (Pan 211).

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Dalit feminist narratives examined in this study challenge and redefine the landscape of Indian literature and feminist discourse. The empowered female protagonists depicted in these works do not simply resist, but proactively rewrite the cultural scripts that have historically marginalized them. They are portrayed as resilient, educated, politically engaged, and self-determined individuals. By engaging with autobiographical accounts, testimonies, and intersectional feminist theory, this paper has illuminated how Dalit literature articulates a language of resistance grounded in historical context and oriented toward emancipation. As scholar Rege observes, these women are not seeking inclusion within existing frameworks, but are creating entirely new frameworks altogether.

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